



A Public Service Column for Members: A Look At Wellness

Critical Incident Stress: Prevention and Management

Dr.
Dawn-Elise
Snipes

Dr. Dawn-Elise Snipes has a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology with a specialty in Behavior Modification, a Master's Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling, and a Doctoral Degree in Counselor Education with a specialty in wellness in law enforcement and the emergency services. Dr. Snipes holds licenses and certifications as a Mental Health Counselor, Rehabilitation Counselor and Fitness Practitioner and belongs to the American Counseling Association and Chi Sigma Iota, the National Counseling Honor Society.

Currently Dr. Snipes serves as the Chief Executive Officer and Clinical Director for Dawn-Elise Enterprises, Inc. which has grown over the past few years to include three companies: Affordable Wellness, The Addictions Counseling Alliance and Police-Counseling.com. In addition to her private practice, she has worked for two years as the Clinical Director of a large multi-level substance abuse and mental health treatment facility in Gainesville, Florida.

You may contact Dr. Snipes by email at:

Dr_Snipes@police-counseling.com

or mail her at
P.O. Box 1688,
Alachua, Florida 32616-1688

PBA wishes to express appreciation to Dr. Snipes for contributing this helpful column for the benefit of our members.

So we will start with that tired adage...the first step is admitting you have a problem...In law enforcement and emergency service work, people are regularly bombarded with awful events and situations that cause a sense of helplessness and horror. It may not be the gore that bothers you, but the disgust at your fellow humans, and what some aspects of society have come to. You realize that you are helpless to really make that much of a change. That is bad enough for people like Jim Bob, but for control freaks like many of us, it is unbearable. We got into our professions to help people and make the world a better place (oh yeah, and to drive fast and carry guns, but I digress). Once you get to the place where you do not feel you can make a difference, a sense of helplessness and hopelessness can take over. You have the ability to keep this in check.

As I said earlier, admit you have a problem. That is, realize that your job is much more stressful than that of many others; therefore, you need to take extra steps to protect yourself.



The first step is to be realistic. Unless you have the support of many different agencies and people, goals such as "cleaning up the neighborhood" are just not going to happen. A more realistic goal would be to

open lines of communication with residents of the neighborhood and get the real bad-asses out. Yes, more will follow, but then you are only focusing on a handful of people at a time instead of every pimp and dealer around. Just like anything else, you need to set small, achievable goals, or you will become miserable.

The next thing you need is a "buddy." This is someone who can listen to you and help you with reality checks. Are you letting the job consume you? Are you becoming cynical and seeing the worst in everyone? Generally, your spouse is **not** the right choice for this job. Anything we say may be suspect, because we, of course, want you to leave work at work and spend time with the family. There are also some things that you cannot talk about with your spouse or we just do not want to hear. Find someone you can decompress with. Surround yourself with positive people, not ones who just want to complain.



Third, keep a log of all of the positive things you do for people. This is especially important when you feel like crap tearing a



list and see what you might be able to change to feel more fulfilled.

Fourth, getcha S.O.M.E.(Sunlight, Oxygen, Movement and Endorphins). Shift work increases your risk of obesity, heart disease and depression. Set a regular schedule and stick to it. Get up, get dressed and get outside, even if it is just to read the paper on your porch. The bright daylight helps set your body's clock. While you are outside if you get a good dose of fresh air and walk around a bit you have added oxygen and movement. Then comes endorphins—the rush. This can come from exercise, sex, doing something thrilling, or even a really good laugh. Again, all of these can be combined, but I will leave that to your imagination. S.O.M.E. will help you feel better during the day, give you more energy, and improve your sleep at night.



Fifth, nutrition. If you are physically healthy you are better able to fight off illness and deal with stressors without becoming sick. I pretty much mainline caffeine, but I try to eat healthfully otherwise.

My point is that you do not have to give up all of your favorite foods, as long as they are not causing you problems (obesity, alcoholism... you get the picture). Strawberry daiquiris are made with fruit after all.

Finally, remember that critical incidents are *abnormal* events that cause a



sense of helplessness or horror. Although many of the things you see day-in and day-out seem routine to you, they are abnormal events for most people. The bullet proof vest cannot stop your heart from breaking. Take care of yourself, and remember that things that happen to people similar to you or someone you love are going to hit a lot harder than other things. They remind you that you are not invincible. If it can happen to someone like you, it can happen to you. Do something about it. Check your family safety plan. Practice a fire escape route at home. Whatever can make you feel safe and comforted again.

Ultimately, you cannot make all of the bad things go away, but you can keep the bad things from destroying you. It takes time and effort, but it can be a positive thing... breakfast with the family, morning coffee on the porch with your spouse, exercising with friends. It is up to you whether you build up your reserves ahead of time, or you wait until there is a crisis to try and keep from being overwhelmed. ●



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